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Abraham Lincoln's Contemporaries

John Greenleaf Whittier

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

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JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER.

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER was born at Haverhill, Massachusetts, in December, 1807. His family were Quakers, who had succeeded in establishing themselves on the banks of the Merrimac, in spite of the persecutions to which they were subjected by their Puritan neighbors, to whom the Friend, in his drab coat, was as great an abomination as the foe in his war-paint and feathers. He lived on the homestead, which is still standing, or was recently, until his twentieth year, dividing his time between the old farm, upon which he worked, and poetry, which he occasionally contributed to the *Haverhill Gazette*, not forgetting shoemaking, which he pursued at intervals, as was the custom forty or fifty years ago among the thrifty sons of Massachusetts. The "gentle craft of leather" numbered its poets and thinkers in past times, as Mr. Whittier reminds us in his poem "The Shoemakers;":

"Thy songs, Hans Sachs, are living yet
In strong and hearty German;
And Bloomfield's lay, and Gifford's wit,
And patriot fame of Sherman.
Still from his book, a mystic seer,
The soul of Behmen teaches,
And England's priestcraft shakes to hear
Of Fox's leathern breeches."

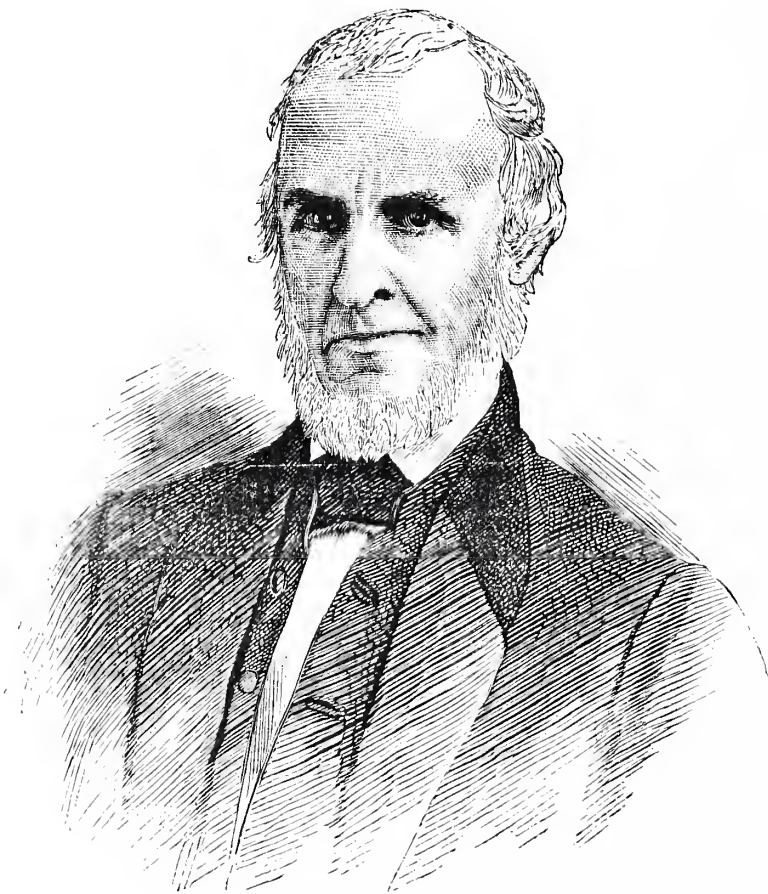
Mr. Whittier cannot be said to be one of the guild, however, if it be true, as one of his biographers has insinuated, that the world would go barefooted if St. Crispin had never had a more devoted disciple.

After one year of academy-life elsewhere, we find Mr. Whittier, in 1829, the editor of the *American Manufacturer*, a journal published in Boston in the tariff interest, and, it is to be presumed, on the side of protection. He must by this time have acquired a local reputation

as a writer of prose, for the proprietors of newspapers, however humble, are not in the habit of intrusting their enterprises to the hands of those who are only known through verse. We are strengthened in this belief by the fact that during the next year Mr. Whittier became the editor of the *New-England Weekly Review*, a Hartford journal, which the poet Brainerd had at one time conducted, as well as the late George D. Prentice, whom Mr. Whittier succeeded. In 1831 he published his first volume of prose—"Legends of New England"—a series of sketches devoted to Indian and Colonial traditions and superstitions, a by-path of literature to which he was early drawn, and in which he still delights to walk at intervals. We find mention of an earlier work in verse, entitled "Moll Pitcher," the tale of a witch of Nahant, but we have never seen it. In 1832 he published a memoir of Brainerd, prefixed to the second edition of his "Literary

Remains;" and, in 1833, an essay, the purport of which may be gathered from its title, "Justice and Expediency; or, Slavery considered with a View to its Abolition." A little later he was at work on the old farm again, advanced (if the reader chooses) from the chair of the editor to that of the law-maker, by representing his town in the State Legislature. In 1835 he published "Mogg Megone," a metrical romance, the hero of which was a chief of the Saco Indians in the war of 1677. He edited the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, an antislavery journal published in Philadelphia, in 1838-39, during which time his office was sacked and burned by a mob. Afterward he acted as one of the secretaries of the Antislavery Society, and edited the "Antislavery Reports" and the *Lowell Standard*. In 1840

he removed to Amesbury, Mass., where he has ever since resided, satisfied, it would seem, with his few years' experience of editorial life. For a time connected, as corresponding editor, with the *National Era*, the last thirty years of his life may be said to have been devoted to literature exclusively. In 1847 he published "Margaret Smith's Journal," and "Supernaturalism in New England;" in 1848, "The Legend of Pennacook," an Indian poem, and "Voices of Freedom," a collection of antislavery poems extending over a period of fifteen years; and, in 1850, "Songs of Labor," and "Old Portraits and Modern Sketches," the last being a series of prose-papers on Bunyan, Baxter, Ellwood, Naylor, Andrew Marvell, John Roberts, William Leggett, and Robert Denmore, a Scottish poet who tuned his rustic pipe at Haverhill at the close of the last and beginning of the present century. These volumes were followed by "The Chapel of the Hermits, and other Poems," in 1852; "Literary Recreations," in 1854; "The Panorama, and other Poems," in 1856; "Home Ballads," in 1860; "In War Time," in 1863; "Snow Bound, a Winter Idyl," in 1865;



JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER.

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"The Tent on the Beach, and other Poems," in 1867; "Among the Hills," 1869; and "Miriam, and other Poems," in 1871.

Such, in brief, has been the outward life of John Greenleaf Whittier.

Mr. Whittier is, in some respects, the most American of all our poets. From the beginning two elements were prominent in his poetry, either of which proved him to be a good patriot, if not a good poet. We mean his belief in a poetical side to Indian life, something therein capable of being made poetical, if not of itself inherently so, and a similar belief in the early colonial life of the white race in this country, its adventures, its trials, and its triumphs. We respect and agree with the latter; the former we consider a delusion.

It has been a fashion among poets, time out of mind, to admire the ages and peoples that were, rather than the age and men that are; and the more remote and primitive the former, the greater their admiration. To the poetic mind there may be some apparent ground for this belief, but to the saner, practical mind, there is none whatever—the age in which we live being the best age, as the better age will be the age in which we are to live. Be this, however, as it may, and admitting the possibility of a poetic side to the life of a pastoral people, we deny that there is any poetry in the life of a race of savages. "The noble savage" is a myth which never had any existence outside of books. Mr. Whittier thinks otherwise, or thought so in his younger years. It would be interesting to trace the origin and progress of Indianism in American literature; but we must not be tempted into it now: enough, that it has been shared, at one time or another, by most American poets. It would be safe to say that, twenty or thirty years ago, one could not open a volume of American verse into which this tiresome old aborigine was not thrust. He was everywhere. His peaceable manners and innocent customs were served up in pretty little lyrics and idyls, and dirges were sung because he was melting away like snow before the fierce sun of civilization. He was glorified in epics, as in "Yamoyden," for example, and "Frontenac," and "The Song of Hiawatha"—the last the nearest approach to poetry possible in Indianism. We shall not compare Mr. Whittier's Indian poetry with that of any other poet, but dismiss it as being as good as the average. The story of "Mogg Megone," what little there is of it, is painful rather than tragic, reminding us somewhat in its handling of the metrical romances of Scott. Scattered through it, as through "The Bridal of Pennacook," is a wealth of allusion to and knowledge of Indianism, mostly in the shape of descriptive items, which are not very well fused, and which rather retard than advance the interest. Description is a strong point with Mr. Whittier generally, but it is a weak one in these poems, where it often runs into excess. He has succeeded much better, we think, with the colonial portion of our history, the poems which these have inspired ranking among his happiest efforts. His earliest reading seems to have lain among these dusky old records, which have exercised a greater charm over him than over any other American singer. How powerful this charm is, may be seen in such poems as "Cassandra Southwick," a story of Puritan persecution of the Quakers, in 1658; "The Exiles," another story of persecution, the victims of which were a sturdy Puritan family who were forced to expatriate themselves to Nantucket for the heinous crime of sheltering a fugitive Quaker; and "St. John," a spirited Huguenot ballad, worthy of Macaulay in his best days. Excellent as these are, however, they will not compare with his later poems of the same character, of which the best are, perhaps, "The Witch's Daughter," "Skipper Ireson's Ride," and "The Truce of Piscataqua." Akin to these in spirit, but less happy in execution, are the poems in which Mr. Whittier has celebrated various localities in New England, some hallowed in his recollection by childish feelings, while others are distinguished for the historical associations which attach to them. It is due to Mr. Whittier to say, that his want of success in some of these poems is not the result of any shortcoming of his own, but inheres in the barbaric names which he felt it to be his poetic duty to retain and perpetuate. That there is often poetry in mere names, Milton and others of the English poets have shown; but these names are not such as prevail in our so-called Indian poetry; not the aboriginal names of insignificant rivers, petty mountains, and savage chiefs, but the classic names of old battle-fields, cities, kingdoms—Trojan, Greek, Roman—the names of sages, kings, heroes. We should ransack all the Indian names in vain for such a sounding passage as this:

"And what resounds

in fields of verdure of Uther's son.

Begirt with British and Armoric knights;
And all who since, baptized or infidel,
Jostled in Aspramont or Montalban,
Damasco, or Marocco, or Trebisond,
Or whom Biserta sent from Afric shore,
When Charlemain with all his peerage fell
By Fontarabia."

Another characteristic of his poetry not yet mentioned, stamps Mr. Whittier as the most thoroughly American of all the American poets. We allude to its antislavery element—an element which we cannot but feel struck its roots early in the most serious part of his nature, and which has always ranked among his profoundest convictions. It may be said, indeed, to have dominated over him during the greater part of his life. We may like it, or we may not; but there it is, and there it was, and there it will be to the end. It shows the man more strongly, we are inclined to think, than any thing else that he has written; but, except at rare intervals, it does not show him at his best. We mean his best as a poet. We do not believe in the poetry which is inspired by morals or politics. It is not poetry; it is politics and morals in verse. Mr. Whittier's antislavery verse, which is now happily antiquated, except as literature, appeals to our sympathies most strongly when it touches the pathetic aspects of slavery, as in "The Farewell of a Virginia Slave-Mother," and "Song of Slaves in the Desert." We must quote a stanza or two from the last:

"Where are we going? where are we going?
Where are we going, Rubee?"

"Lord of peoples, lord of lands,
Look across these shining sands,
Through the furnace of the noon,
Through the white light of the moon.
Strong the Ghiblee wind is blowing,
Strange and large the world is growing!
Speak, and tell us where we are going,
Where are we going, Rubee?"

"When we went from Bornon land,
We were like the leaves and sand,
We were many, we are few;
Life has one, and death has two:
Whitened bones our path are showing,
Thou All-seeing, Thou All-knowing!
Hear us, tell us, where we are going,
Where are we going, Rubee?"

A peculiarity among American poets, as compared with their fellow-singers in England, is the habit which they appear to cherish of celebrating in verse their personal friends, and those who share their views in regard to morals and moral ideas. Ready as they are at all times to manifest their personal love or admiration, the foremost lag far behind Mr. Whittier, who has sung of nearly every person that was worth singing about in the ranks of antislavery and reform, generally in excellent taste, often exquisitely. He has also overcome the difficulties which attend the writing of obituary poems, to which he imparts a sincerity and earnestness seldom found in writings of this kind. His grief is never commonplace, his reflections are never trite. How admirable are these stanzas, addressed to Joseph Sturge, of Birmingham, on the death of his sister:

"Not upon thee or thine the solemn angel
Hath evil wrought:
Her funeral anthem is a glad evangel—
The good die not!"

"God calls our loved ones, but we lose not wholly
What He hath given:
They live on earth, in thought and deed, as truly
As in His heaven."

And this from the poem entitled "Gone:"

"And half we deemed she needed not
The changing of her sphere,
To give to Heaven a shining One
Who walked an angel here.

"Fold her, O Father! in Thine arms,
And let her henceforth be
A messenger of love, between
Our human hearts and Thee.

"Still let her mild rebuking stand
Between us and the wrong,
And her dear memory serve to make
Our faith in goodness strong.

"And grant that she who, trembling here,
 Distrusted all her powers,
 May welcome to her holier home
 The well-beloved of ours."

Mr. Whittier is fortunate in portraying what he conceives to be the mental character of those whom he celebrates, particularly so in the case of Follen, John Woolman, whose writings Lamb advised one of his correspondents to get by heart, Channing, Webster, and Randolph. Our estimate of Webster differs from his, but we recognize the great excellence of his "Ichabod," considered as a poem simply, and the nobility of feeling which prompted it, mistaken as we consider the judgment which it renders. "Randolph of Roanoke" is a manly tribute to one of the most marked characters in our political history:

"He held his slaves, yet kept the while
 His reverence for the human;
 In the dark vassals of his will
 He saw but Man and Woman;
 No hunter of God's outraged poor
 His Roanoke Valley entered;
 No trader in the souls of men
 Across his threshold ventured."

Another characteristic of Mr. Whittier's poetry is its continual reference to the personages mentioned and the incidents described in the sacred writings. The Hebraic element is a marked feature in his genius. That it is capable of being turned to the grandest poetical account, Milton has shown us; that it is powerful, even in lesser hands, every reader of English poetry knows. If the Bible has no other effect upon those who read it, it has the effect which the best English ever written or spoken cannot fail to produce in thoughtful minds—the sense of satisfaction in simple and noble thoughts, expressed in simple and noble words. Mr. Whittier has his Bible at his finger-ends, and is as familiar with its history as with that of his native land. He has walked and talked with seers and prophets, has seen the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, and has heard the thunder and the still, small voice which followed it:

"In sudden whirlwind, cloud, and flame,
 The Spirit of the Highest came;
 Before mine eyes a vision passed,
 A glory terrible and vast;
 With dreadful eyes of living things,
 And sounding sweep of angel-wings;
 With circling light and sapphire throne,
 And flame-like form of One thereon,
 And voice of that dread Likeness sent
 Down from the crystal firmament."

The Hebraic cast of Mr. Whittier's mind, joined, perhaps, to his descent from a once persecuted sect, accounts for the serious character of his poetry in general, and particularly for the indignant, fiery spirit which burns at a white heat in his antislavery verse. Being the man he is, he could not have written other than he has. For our own part, we wish he could have persuaded himself to let others do the moral work he had in hand so long; for we are sure that he would have gathered for us a ripper and more abundant harvest of poetry. He is never so much a poet as when he gives himself up to the contemplation of imaginative themes, as, for example, in "The Wife of Manoah to her Husband," "A Dream of Summer," "Hampton Beach," "Memories," "Questions of Life," "To my Old Schoolmaster," "Tavler," "The Barefoot Boy," most of the "Home Ballads," and all the "Songs of Labor." At first sight, the object proposed in some of these appears to be realistic; but the spirit in which they are conceived, and the style in which they are wrought out, are so poetical that the final effect is such as imagination alone can leave. Our favorites are in the "Songs of Labor," which only an American poet could have written, and no American poet except Mr. Whittier. They are admirable.

The more we think of it, the firmer becomes our conviction that Mr. Whittier has not done his genius justice. The Hebraic element is strong within him, as we have noted; but quite as strong are other elements, among which are perfect freedom of thought in theological matters—the outgrowth, probably, of his Quaker descent and associations—and his supreme love of and satisfaction in Nature. Without being a freethinker, in the old and abused sense of the term, he is one of the freest of our thinkers, following in this habit of mind the example of Mr. Emerson, whose influence his poetry at times reflects, as in his "Questions of Life." Witness this passage:

"Through the vastness, arching all,
 I see the great stars rise and fall,

The rounding seasons come and go,
 The tided oceans ebb and flow;
 The tokens of a central force,
 Whose circles, in their widening force,
 O'erlap and move the universe;
 The workings of the law whence springs
 The rhythmic harmony of things,
 Which shapes in earth the darkling spar,
 And orbs in heaven the morning star.
 Of all I see, in earth and sky—
 Star, flower, beast, bird—what part have I?
 This conscious life—is that the same
 Which thrills the universal frame,
 Whereby the caverned crystal shoots,
 And mounts the sap from forest-roots,
 Whereby the exiled wood-bird tells
 When spring makes green her native dells?
 How feels the stone the pang of birth
 Which brings its sparkling prism forth?
 The forest-tree the throb which gives
 The life-blood to its new-born leaves?
 Do bird and blossom feel, like me,
 Life's many-folded mystery—
 The wonder which is yet to be?
 Or staid I severed and distinct,
 From Nature's chain of life unlinked?
 Allied to all, yet not the less
 Prisoned in separate consciousness,
 Alone overburdened with a sense
 Of life, and cause, and consequence?"

Mr. Whittier's love of Nature is so strong that it cannot escape the notice of even his most careless readers. Early and late it has distinguished all his poems, especially "Snow Bound," which contains, besides its dainty little collection of wintry pictures, portraits of various members of the poet's family, painted with a masterly hand.

Not to dwell longer, however, on what we conceive to be the excellences and defects of Mr. Whittier's genius, we close our imperfect remarks with a bit of verse with which we entirely concur. It is the poet's judgment upon himself and his poetry:

"Of mystic beauty, dreamy grace,
 No rounded art the lack supplies;
 Unskilled the subtle lines to trace,
 Or soften shades on Nature's face,
 I view her common forms with unanointed eyes
 "Nor mine the seer-like power to show
 The secrets of the heart and mind;
 To drop the plummet-line below
 Our common world of joy and woe,
 A more intense despair or brighter hope to find.
 "Yet here at least an earnest sense
 Of human right and weal is shown:
 A hate of tyranny intense,
 And hearty in its vehemence,
 As if my brother's pain and sorrow were my own.
 "O Freedom! if to me belong
 Nor mighty Milton's gift divine,
 Nor Marvel's wit and graceful song,
 Still, with a love as deep and strong
 As theirs, I lay, like them, my best gifts on thy shrine!"

R. H. STODDARD.

[The American Cyclopædia.]

WHITTIER, John Greenleaf, an American poet, born in Haverhill, Mass., Dec. 17, 1807. His parents belonged to the society of Friends, of which he is also a member. He worked on the farm till his 20th year, attended Haverhill academy two years, and in 1829 became editor of the "American Manufacturer" in Boston, and in 1830 of the "New England Weekly Review" at Hartford. But he soon returned to the farm, and in 1835-'6 was a member of the Massachusetts legislature. In 1836 he was appointed secretary of the American anti-slavery society, and removed to Philadelphia, where in 1838-'9 he edited the "Pennsylvania Freeman," the office of which was sacked and burned by a mob. From this time he was one of the most prominent anti-slavery men in the country, and his writings, both prose and poetry, were largely in support of that cause. In 1840 he removed to Amesbury, Mass., where he still resides (1876), and in 1847 became corresponding editor of the "National Era," an anti-slavery newspaper published in Washington. He has never married. His prose publications are: "Legends of New England," partly in verse (Hartford, 1831); "Justice and Expediency, or Slavery Considered with a View to its Abolition" (1833); "The Stranger in Lowell" (1845); "Supernaturalism in New England" (1847); "Leaves from Margaret Smith's Journal" (1849); "Old Portraits and Modern Sketches" (1850); and "Literary Recreations" (1854). His poetical works include "Mogg Megone" (Boston, 1836); "Ballads" (1838); "Lays of my Home, and other Poems" (1843); "The Bridal of Pennacook" (1848); "The Voices of Freedom" (Philadelphia, 1849); "Songs of Labor, and other Poems" (Boston, 1850); "The Chapel of the Hermits, and other Poems" (1853); "The Panorama, and other Poems" (1856); "Home Ballads and Poems" (1860); "In War Time, and other Poems" (1863); "Snow-Bound" (1866); "The Tent on the Beach, and other Poems" (1867); "Among the Hills, and other Poems" (1868); "Miriam, and other Poems" (1870); "The Pennsylvania Pilgrim, and other Poems" (1872); "Mabel Martin" (1874); and "Hazel Blossoms" (1875). Several collective editions have been published. As a poet Whittier is more peculiarly American than any other of equal fame. His poems have been largely inspired by current events, and their patriotic, democratic, and humane spirit gives a strong hold upon the public. He wrote a hymn for the opening of the centennial exhibition at Philadelphia in 1876.

